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Sulfidization of Sulfide Ores for Hydrometallurgical Extraction
of Copper and Other Metals

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The present invention relates to a process for extracting metals from a copper-sulfidic and/or copper/iron-sulfidic ore or ore concentrate.

By far the biggest part of the world's copper production (about 90%) is extracted from copper sulfide minerals. Among the copper sulfide minerals, there may be mentioned, above all, chalcopyrite (CuFeS_2), bornite (Cu_5FeS_4), cubanite (CuFeS_4), chalcosine (Cu_2S), digenite (Cu_9S_5), covellite (CuS), enargite (Cu_3AsS_4), tennantite ($\text{Cu}_{12}\text{As}_4\text{S}_{13}$) and tetrahedrite ($\text{Cu}_{12}\text{Sb}_4\text{S}_{13}$).

Among the copper sulfide minerals, chalcopyrite is the most widespread mineral; therefore, it is of the greatest scientific and economic importance in the development of new extraction methods.

In addition, chalcopyrite is characterized by always containing deposited gold, platinum metals and other rare metals as well as rare earths.

The copper sulfide minerals are extracted from ores, which are usually milled and concentrated by a flotation process to yield an ore concentrate, whereby a substantial part of the silicates contained in the ground stock, in particular, is separated off.

Today, in addition to the known pyrometallurgical and hydrometallurgical processes, there are various approaches to leaching copper and other metals occurring in the copper sulfide minerals from the ores or ore concentrates using bioleaching processes. This involves the problem that only about 20% of the copper contained

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in chalcopyrite can be leached out using the known processes because passivation of the chalcopyrite occurs.

Although a large number of attempts to avoid the passivation of chalcopyrite have been successfully performed on a laboratory scale, no utilizable process technology for metal extraction could be derived therefrom to date.

Thus, it has been the object of the invention to provide an improved process for extracting copper and other metals from chalcopyrite.

This object is achieved by a process in which

1. chalcopyrite is converted to covellite and pyrite by the addition of sulfur in an open process; and
2. copper and other soluble metals enriched in the covellite, pyrite and accompanying sulfides are leached out.

This conversion is represented by the following equation:



It has been found that chalcopyrite can be converted to covellite and pyrite almost completely when the process is appropriately conducted. In this conversion, a chalcopyrite grain from the ground stock yields a grain having a core of pyrite and a shell of covellite. In contrast to chalcopyrite, from covellite, copper and the remaining metals enriched therein can be leached out with no problems using conventional leaching methods, because passivation problems do not exist in this case.

This reaction is exothermic so that a comparatively low expenditure of energy is necessary for the conversion.

A possible process for extracting copper from covellite is described by the following equation:

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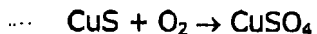
The copper sulfate produced, like the iron sulfate, is soluble in acid. Thus, iron and copper are solubilized and can be separated from the solution.

Also, the iron can be oxidized and leached out from the pyrite.

What remains is a mixture of precious and other metals and rare earths contained in the ground stock, especially of gold, silver, platinum and platinum metals, cobalt, nickel and zinc, which will deposit as a residue on the bottom of the tank in which the leaching process is performed.

With novel bioleaching processes, the copper can be leached out in a particularly environment-friendly manner and with a relatively low production of sulfuric acid.

In this process, the covellite is oxidized in accordance with



in the presence of special bacteria and separated in an aqueous solution.

The conversion of chalcopyrite should preferably proceed in an inert atmosphere, for example, under nitrogen, sulfur dioxide or argon.

A range of between room temperature and 501 °C has been established as a preferred temperature range for the conversion. Especially at 410 °C, the conversion can proceed at a relatively high rate.

The conversion process of chalcopyrite to covellite can be promoted by microwave irradiation. Since the microwaves heat up the individual grains of the ground stock in both inner and outer portions thereof, the diffusion processes proceeding in the conversion during the formation of the pyrite core and the shell of covellite can be accelerated thereby. By this improvement of reaction kinetics, the open process can be accelerated, and the economic efficiency of the process can be thus increased.

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Depending on the reaction temperature and the degree of any microwave irradiation, the conversion can proceed for a period of from 0.5 h to 3 h, especially 2 h. While a conversion of 80% can be achieved in 30 minutes with no problems, the chalcopyrite is almost completely converted after 3 h.

The sulfur should be added to the chalcopyrite in stoichiometric amounts.

The sulfur can be added to the ground stock in a solid form, in which case the conversion of the chalcopyrite can be effected under ambient pressure, but should preferably be performed under a pressure above atmospheric of up to 10 bar. To avoid that too much sulfur evaporates at temperatures for conversion, it may be advantageous for the conversion to proceed in an atmosphere saturated with sulfur vapor.

On the other hand, the conversion may also be effected without the addition of solid sulfur in an atmosphere containing gaseous sulfur under reduced pressure.

Conversion with the addition of a sulfur plasma is also possible.

The process can be realized in a three-chamber tunnel furnace. The three-chamber tunnel furnace has first and third chambers which serve as sluices for the second chamber. The second chamber of the furnace is provided with electric heating coils and has an inlet for nitrogen or argon. In addition, the second chamber is provided with fused silica windows for introducing microwaves.

Experiments have shown that the conversion to covellite is optimized, in particular, when the mixture of ground stock and sulfur is irradiated with microwaves having a specific energy density of from 8 to 35 kWh/t, based on the quantity of the ground stock. Both microwaves of 815 MHz and those of 2.45 GHz can be used.

The conversion of chalcopyrite to covellite may also be effected in a fluidized bed reactor.

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